

**CHRISTIAN FAITH AND EVOLUTION**

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Spring Lecture Series**

**Lecture Six  
“Incarnation, Passion and Evolution”  
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## **Aufhebung**

We are going to start today with a concept from German Enlightenment Philosophy, and I am going to go out on a limb and guess that this may be the only Sunday School Class in North America that is beginning, on this particular morning, in this particular way.

The word is “Aufhebung,” a noun derived from the verb “aufgehoben,” which has two meanings:

1. To abolish or nullify
2. To lift up

Aufhebung is a three stroke process in which an idea or value is first affirmed, then struck down (“nullified” / “abolished”), then reconstituted at an even higher level. The meaning of the first two strokes still contribute to the greater meaning of the third.

Let’s work with some examples.

## *Baseball*

Who has heard of Tommy John?

He was a pretty good pitcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers, winning 16 games in 1973. That's the first stroke: affirmation.

Second stroke: In 1974, he suffered an injury to ulnar collateral ligament in his pitching arm, an injury that in that day and age meant the end of a career. But the Dodger's surgeon had an idea for a new approach, in which the ligament from the elbow was replaced with a tendon from elsewhere in the body. He had the surgery and for 18 months was out of baseball, working to rehabilitate his arm. Second stroke: nullification.

Third stroke: In 1976, John returned to baseball, working back into form and winning 10 games, an incredible accomplishment. Then, in 1977, his record was 20-7, and for the next four years a pretty good pitcher had become one of the best pitchers in the game. He pitched in the major leagues until 1989. Third stroke: reconstitution on a higher plane. Through the process of surgery and rehabilitation, he had become a better pitcher.

Aufhebung.

*E Pluribus Unum*

From the passage of the Declaration of Independence, through victory in the Revolutionary War, and the adoption of the Constitution, the United States became a country. The motto *E Pluribus Unum* (“out of many, One”) was included, in 1776, on the first seal of the United States, suggesting that out of many colonies and states, a single country had emerged. First stroke: affirmation of union.

There was a problem: the Constitution was self-referentially incoherent. Slavery, which it acknowledged, was inconsistent with the deeper principles of human rights that the Constitution guaranteed. This tension festered, then boiled when, in 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States. Within a month, South Carolina seceded from the Union, claiming that inasmuch as the states had voluntarily formed the union at its inception, they could voluntarily withdraw. President Lincoln said this action was illegal, and soon the nation was engulfed in civil war. Second stroke: nullification of union.

The North prevailed, slavery was abolished, and the union was reconstituted on a more secure and higher plane: more secure, in that now the question about voluntary secession has been settled, and higher in that the incoherence slavery had represented had been removed. Third stroke: having been broken and put back together, the nation emerged stronger than before.

Aufhebung.

*Gospel*

This pattern is rather basic to the gospel.

It is in the Sermon on the Mount.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

It is in this invitation:

“If any would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever would save their lives will lose them, and whoever loses their lives for my sake will find them.”

It is in this promise:

“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and you will be exalted.”

Aufhebung: affirmation, cancellation, reconstitution on a higher plane.

## **Anglican Profession**

This class has offered an explanation and reaffirmation of the Anglican “thesis of compatibility” between Christian faith and evolutionary science.

Our tradition’s position is aptly symbolized by the fact that the Church of England received Charles Darwin for burial, with full honors, in Westminster Abbey. Lest there be any remaining doubt on the subject, with no fuss and little fanfare the 2006 General Convention of the Episcopal Church resolved that “acceptance of evolution is entirely compatible with an authentic and living Christian faith.”

Hearing a blanket statement such as that one, a questioner, Socrates perhaps, might press for additional information. To the Episcopal Church, what is “living faith”? When is it “authentic”?

## **Living Faith**

The first question is: What is faith, and how does it “live”?

I liked the definition of faith I cited in week three, from the Anglican theologian W.H. Griffith's Thomas.

Faith, he writes, “affects the whole of man's nature. It commences with the conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence; it continues in the confidence of the heart or emotions based on conviction, and it is crowned in the consent of the will, by means of which the conviction and confidence are expressed in conduct.”<sup>1</sup>

That makes faith trinitarian in form. It quickens to life in a conviction of the mind that “yes, I do believe that this is true.” Thereafter, it lives in an interplay between that conviction and the heart's confidence and the will's consent. For “conviction, confidence, consent,” one could substitute “belief, trust and commitment.”

That is how faith lives—by involving the whole self.

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<sup>1</sup> McGrath, *Dawkins's God*, 86.

## **Authentic Faith**

The second question is: when is faith “authentically” Christian?

To some degree, answers to questions like that are always going to be a matter of opinion. At the same time, to some degree they are not.

In the Anglican tradition, there is a long-honored principle: *lex orandi, lex credendi*. *Lex* is law, *Orandi* is worship, *credendi* is belief. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*: the law of worship is the law of belief.

We believe what we pray.

Of course, the reverse would have to be true as well—we pray what we believe. Belief and prayer are the two sides of one coin.



### Three core themes

What do we pray, as Episcopalians, through our Hymnal and Book of Common Prayer?

On Christmas, we pray the Incarnation:

*O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that Light on earth, may also enjoy Him perfectly in Heaven.<sup>2</sup>*

Through Holy Week, we pray Christ's Saving Passion:

*Assist us mercifully with your help, O Lord God of our salvation, that we may enter with joy upon the contemplation of those mighty acts, whereby you have given us life and immortality; through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>3</sup>*

On Easter we pray, and *sing*, his Resurrection:

*Now the queen of seasons, bright with the day of splendor,  
With the royal feast of feasts, comes its joy to render,  
Comes to glad Jerusalem, who with true affection,  
Welcomes in unwearied strains, Jesus' resurrection.*

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<sup>2</sup> BCP, 212.

<sup>3</sup> BCP, 270.

For living faith, authentically Christian, these beliefs are central:

Incarnation→Passion→Resurrection

Stroke 1

Stroke 2

Stroke 3

**No surprises, and that's the point**

If these selections seem conventional, that is the intention.

We are considering the Anglican tradition's claim that its Christian Faith is compatible with evolutionary science. That wouldn't be much of a claim if it rested on the more or less discreet rejection of doctrines that an average Sunday worship-goer would recognize as central.

## **The Book of Common Prayer . . . and Barth**

In this connection, I can explain something about me that may have puzzled some of you for many years: why the emphasis on Barth?

The answer is that, in first reading Barth a quarter century ago, I found that I was hearing the faith that makes me glad to be a Christian.

Christ is born.

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

The thousands of pages in Barth's theology are an extended exploration of meanings and implications in those three themes. Reading Barth, at every turn we are face to face with the Incarnate, Crucified and Risen Lord.

## **Barth and Aufhebung**

It was in studying Barth that I was first introduced to Aufhebung, this “pattern of affirming, cancelling, and reconstituting on a higher plane.”<sup>4</sup> The Barth scholar, George Hunsinger, explains that Barth had been exposed to the concept as a student in reading the philosophy of Hegel, and made it a recurring pattern throughout his theology.

It was a perfect fit, according to Hunsinger, because the pattern’s “underlying metaphor would seem to be ‘incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection’.”

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<sup>4</sup> Hunsinger, *Karl Barth*, 85–86.

## **Aufhebung and Gospel**

The Incarnation, signified by Christmas, is the great doctrine of world affirmation. The maker of the world so loved the world as to visit it in the person of his only–begotten Son. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14 RSV). In Barth’s words: “He makes [our] situation His own.”<sup>5</sup>

The Passion, Good Friday, is the Incarnation’s antithesis, a cancellation. “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (John 1:11 RSV). If the Incarnation affirms the goodness in creation, the Passion signifies the darkness that threatens to engulf it. Barth’s term for it is *das Nichtige*, the “nullity” or “nothingness.”<sup>6</sup>

The Resurrection, Easter, manifests God’s reconstitution of creation, through the crucible of the passion, on a higher plane. It is the event and sign in history marking the triumph of Christ and the ascendancy of the coming world. “We have beheld his glory” (John 1:14 RSV).

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<sup>5</sup> Barth, CD IV.1, 158–59.

<sup>6</sup> Barth, CD III.3, 289.

According to Barth, the pattern of affirmation, cancellation and triumph constitutes the truth of Jesus Christ and, through Christ, of all creation. The world, belonging as it does within Christ's dominion, is "drawn into the darkness and light" of his own mystery.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Barth, CD 1.2, 471.

## **Secular parables**

Once we know the pattern at its sacred source, we may begin to discern its reflection in “secular” events. Barth calls such reflections “secular parables of the gospel.”<sup>8</sup> Through these parables, the world itself speaks to us of “the goodness, peril, triumph and future glory of the divine work of creation which is enclosed in Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

Now, in a small way, we can see the pitching career of Mr. Tommy John; and, in a larger way, the history of the United States, as parables—reflections on the historical plane of the true meaning of our existence.

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<sup>8</sup> Barth, CD IV.3, first part, 115.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 123.



## **Aufhebung and Evolution**

Evolution is a story of “emergent value.”

A “value” is something that is good for its own sake, “intrinsically worthwhile.”<sup>10</sup>

From the moment of its inception, some 13 billion years ago, this universe already embodied certain values in, for instance, the properties of matter and laws of physics.

The four forces, the speed of light, and the structure of the hydrogen atom are values. A universe where such things exist is already so much more interesting and valuable than nothing.

What is more, the early universe was loaded with potential because, while valuable in their own right, the properties of matter and laws of physics were available as building blocks for future values: “galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, or island home.”<sup>11</sup>

This is cause for celebration, as we do, in here, on Sunday morning. That language is from the Book of Common Prayer, one of the forms for what we call “The Great Thanksgiving.”

Some 4.5 billion years ago, apparently, there was a great leap forward, as something new and valuable emerged: self-replicating life. At first, relatively simple, but it held fantastic potential.

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<sup>10</sup> Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 69.F

<sup>11</sup> BCP, 370.

Through time, bit by bit that potential would emerge and flower, through the Kingdoms, phyla, classes, orders, and families of the natural world. Animals and plants. Marsupials, mammals and mollusks. Cornflakes and Chihuahuas! Itzhak Perlman and the Charlie Daniels Band. Sidney Moncrief and Queen Elizabeth I.

“From the primal elements you brought forth the human race, and blessed us with memory, reason, and skill. You made us the rulers of creation.” Again, from “The Great Thanksgiving.”

With life however, there also emerged a shadow on creation: suffering and death.

## Suffering

As Christians who have accepted Darwin, we are mindful of the problems Darwin spoke of concerning the waste, cruelty and suffering in nature.

There is an old theological doctrine concerning the problem of evil, called the *privatio boni*. It says that evil exists not in its own right, but only as a “privation of the good.”

Evil’s reality is peculiar, derivative. Good can exist without evil, but evil cannot exist without the good. The devil is a parasite.

Understand, this doesn’t mean that evil isn’t real. It is as real as a plane crash, or drug war on the streets of Acapulco.

In this life, there is no escaping the problem, because almost all the values of the living world emerged through a process involving suffering and death.

Evolution, you see, is a three-stroke process.

A generation comes into its own—full of value, and biologically equipped to pass its values on to succeeding generations.

The parent generation dies, is “nullified.”

But in the next generation, life is reconstituted, values intact, and, here and there, new values having emerged: a keener sense of sight or smell, a new appetite for foods that can fuel a larger brain.

Thus a universe, initially inert, would eventually give rise to beauty, intelligence and goodness, illumed by faith, and hope, and love.

Affirmation→cancellation→reconstitution on a higher plane.

## The literature

In the theological literature, one finds insights about the relationship between suffering and goodness, and the part that death plays in the emergence of value.

“Without suffering,” as Keith Ward writes, ‘the capacity for feeling could not exist, and without death the development of new species would not be possible.’<sup>12</sup>

Holmes Rolston calls suffering “the shadow side of sentience,” and even of enjoyment, for “one cannot enjoy a world in which one cannot suffer, any more than one can succeed in a world in which one cannot fail.”<sup>13</sup> The evolutionary process is balanced so that, over the long term, suffering only exists insofar as it offers a benefit to value. Rolston points this out. “Natural selection, so far from needlessly increasing pain, rather trims it back in the system. . . . Pain is self-eliminating except insofar as it is instrumental of a subsequent, functional good. Intrinsic pain has no logical or empirical place in the system; neither does maladaptive pain.”<sup>14</sup> Values are intrinsic; they exist for their own sake. Suffering does not, according to the logic of natural selection. Suffering’s value is derivative rather than intrinsic. (*Privatio Boni*)

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<sup>12</sup> Ward, *Pascal’s Fire*, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Rolston, *Genes, Genesis and God*, 303–04.

<sup>14</sup> Rolston, *Genes, Genesis and God*, 304.

Rolston makes a theological connection. “The system historically uses pain for creative advance. Such is the biology of life. Theologically speaking, this position is not inconsistent with a theistic belief about God’s providence; rather it is in many respects remarkably like it. There is grace sufficient to cope with thorns in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-9). Life is a table prepared in the midst of enemies, green pastures in the valley of deep darkness (Psalm 23).”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 305

***Imago Dei***

Rolston connects the suffering to Christ's passion. "The world is not a paradise of hedonistic ease." Rather "life is learned and earned by hard labor" and there is "something divine about the power to suffer through. The cruciform creation is, in the end, deiform, godly, just because of this element of struggle, not in spite of it."<sup>16</sup> "The secret of life," Rolston concludes, "is that it is a passion play."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 307.

## **The Secret of Life**

Faith—Christian faith—is an intellectual, emotional and ethical involvement with Jesus Christ as the Incarnate, Crucified and Risen Lord.

Faith is belief, trust and commitment to Christ as God’s message to the world that “From before all worlds, this is who I am.”

In this message, we see the three stroke pattern: affirmation, cancellation, reconstitution on a higher plane as the eternal backdrop of our own existence—as individuals, families, nations, as a species, as living creatures.

I like the way my teacher Christopher Morse has put this—Christians are not just believers, we are unbelievers too. We do not believe that the universe just happens to exist. We do not believe that life is pointless. We don’t believe that, in the end, it doesn’t matter how we live.



## Yes or No?

In college, one of my better teachers was Leo Marx, professor of English and American Studies. As I remember, with Professor Marx discussions of novelists, poets, fiction writers would eventually come down to a question of “yes” or “no.” Did this thinker, writer finally say “yes”—to America, perhaps, but more generally to life as meaningful and valuable, or did he or she say “no.” Thirty years later I can’t remember who was which.

Hawthorne, maybe, would be “no.” Mark Twain was “no.” Whitman, Emerson, were “yes.” Faulkner, “no,” I think; Walker Percy, “yes,” if he was even on the list.

As for Professor Marx himself, who was a fine man as far as I could tell, and without a doubt a wonderful teacher, the final word was “no.” He was not a man who trusted God was love indeed, or love creation’s final law.

He told us that religion was manure, noble sounding (expletive deleted).

“What a book a Devil’s Chaplain might write,” wrote Darwin, “on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horridly cruel works of nature.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Randal Keynes, *Darwin, His Daughter and Human Evolution* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001), 269–70, where Keynes cites George Foote, *Darwin on God* (London, 1889), 20. The “Devil’s Chaplain” comment, now a title of a Richard Dawkins book, is cited from *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 6.178.

To that, I think Professor Leo Marx could say “Amen.”

## **Coherence**

Our “Amen” centers on a certain human being who deeply trusted that God was love indeed, and love creation’s final law—and who was crucified between two thieves.

What a book a Devil’s chaplain could write on an event like that. That’s the kind of happening that could keep a whole platoon of devils’ chaplains busy for a while. The Devil himself could build a master narrative around it, pulling together all the threads that show how life builds up our hopes, only to dash them in the end.

But the Devil has a problem, because the Christian faith doesn’t oppose his “no” with a simple “yes.” For Christian faith, life is not a matter of “yes or no,” but of “yes,” then “no,” then “yes.” There is light, then darkness, then surpassing light.

Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection. When the Risen Christ appears to his disciples, he still shows the marks of the wounds of his crucifixion. The “no” is recognized and included in the final “yes.”

That is the Christian faith that confirms, coheres, with evolution.

Barth called optimism and pessimism the perennial opposites of life, and felt that each can be taken seriously as a philosophical interpretation of our existence—aside, that is, from considerations of faith.

But even more can they both be taken seriously when seen against the backdrop of the gospel. The gospel gives us Christ as the fulfillment of the covenant between the world and God and “it is the fulfillment of the covenant in Him which shows us that the two opposites of life both have their necessity and seriousness since they are both grounded in an eternal dimension; that their mutual relationship is that of the overcoming of the one by the other.”<sup>19</sup>

The gospel is the yes that has been annulled, then reconstituted on a higher plane.

Three strokes: incarnation, passion, resurrection, are the open secret of our existence.

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<sup>19</sup> Barth, CD III.1, 412–13.

## Musical Apostle

To Barth's ear, this window on reality had a musical apostle: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Barth began his day, before working on his theology, by listening to Mozart. He said this was "music which for the true Christian is not mere entertainment, enjoyment or edification but food and drink; music full of comfort and counsel for his needs."<sup>20</sup>

Barth asks:

Why is it possible to hold that Mozart has a place in theology . . . although he was not a father of the Church, does not seem to have been a particularly active Christian . . . apparently leading what might appear to us a rather frivolous existence when not occupied in his work?

Here is the answer:

[Mozart] had heard, and causes those who have ears to hear, even today, what we shall not see until the end of time—the whole context of providence. As though in the light of this end, he heard the harmony of creation to which the shadow also belongs but in which the shadow is not darkness, deficiency is not defeat, sadness cannot become despair, trouble cannot degenerate into tragedy and infinite melancholy is not ultimately forced to claim undisputed sway. Thus the cheerfulness in this harmony is not without its limits, but the light shines all the more

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<sup>20</sup> Barth, CD III.3, 297–98.

brightly because it breaks forth from the shadow. The sweetness is also bitter and cannot therefore cloy. Life does not fear death but knows it well.<sup>21</sup>

Aufhebung.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 298.

## Conclusion

As I said, I recognize in Barth the core of faith from which I was nourished as a child, then strengthened as a priest for Christian service. Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection are the themes that make all the difference for preaching week-in, week-out, counseling the perplexed or troubled, tending to the sick, burying the dead—and welcoming new Christians.

I have had now more than a quarter century's experience with pastoral activities of such a sort within the Anglican tradition—whose compatibility with evolutionary science we have placed in question. I turned rather late from a full commitment to work in that vein towards an academic interest in the issues of theology and science.

And there I was somewhat surprised to find a deep consonance between the Incarnation–Passion–Resurrection interplay and the antitheses that drive our natural history. Life's value, its pathos, and creative resilience answer to this gospel story. That intrinsically meaningless events and directionless processes give rise to lives that manifestly do have meaning and direction, in this context, makes perfect sense. Thus deepened consistency with Christ, yields sublime harmony with science.